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[redacted]

CIA, State and Defense Had Doubts About Attacking Haiphong

Documents from Nixon's Secret Study of the War: National Security Study Memorandum No. 1

QUESTION 28d

What are current views on the proportion of war-essential imports that could come into North Vietnam over the rail or road lines from China, even if all imports by sea were denied and a strong effort even made to interdict ground transport? What is the evidence?

The Defense Department's Answer

Land Import Capacity

In 1968, NVN imported an average of 6,800 STPD (short tons per day); 6,000 STPD by sea, and 800 STPD by land. Imports by land were higher in 1967, amounting to about 1,100 STPD. However, the land lines of communication from China were not used to capacity. It is estimated that the two rail lines from China have a theoretical uninterdicted capacity of about 8,000 STPD and the road network could provide an additional 7,000 STPD during the dry season (normally June-September) and about 2,000 STPD during the poor weather months. The combined capacity of the land routes (9,000-15,000 STPD) is more than enough to transport North Vietnam's total import requirements of about 7,000 STPD. If all seaborne imports were to come through China, considerable logistic problems would have to be solved by the Chinese regime.

Interdiction of Imports from China

If seaborne imports can be denied to NVN, her ability to successfully pursue the war in SVN would be dependent on land imports from China.

A strong effort to interdict road and rail transport from Communist China through North Vietnam would require a concerted and coordinated air interdiction campaign against all transportation: military support; petroleum oil, and lubricants power; industrial; air defense; and communications target systems. The interrelationship of the effects of destruction of targets in one category to the effectiveness of others is such that a cumulative impact is achieved. The air campaign would be conducted in such a manner as to be free of the militarily confining constraints which have characterized the conduct of the war in the north in the past. The concept would preclude attacks on population as a target but would accept high risks of civilian casualties in order to achieve destruction of war-supporting targets.

An interdiction campaign as described above, when employed in conjunction with denial of sea imports, would, in large part, isolate Hanoi and Haiphong from each other and from the rest of the country. Isolation of Hanoi, the focal point of the road and rail system, would be highly effective in reducing North Vietnam's capability to reinforce aggression in South Vietnam. Importation of war-supporting material would be seriously reduced. Road capacities would be reduced by a factor well in excess of the estimated 50 percent believed to have been accomplished during the summer months of 1966 and 1967. Over time, North Vietnam's capability to cope with the cumulative effects of such an air campaign would be significantly curtailed.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that resumption of an interdiction campaign similar to that carried out in Route Package I between July and 1 November 1968 would assure almost total interdiction of truck and waterborne movement of supplies into the demilitarized zone and Laos. Naval blockade offshore and interdiction of Regional Package II to Thanh Hao would further enhance this effort.

Commitment of B-52 forces following heavy and unrestricted suppression of defenses by fighters, could reduce the amount of time to accomplish the above. Although the North Vietnamese have established a significant by-pass capability, the transportation nets remain vulnerable at many key points. The locomotive population could be attrited quickly if all buffer restrictions were removed near the Chinese border.

There is not sufficient data available at this time on either the cost or the effectiveness of an air campaign against these land lines to reach a firm conclusion as to the chances of isolating NVN from her neighbors. Past attempts to cut rail, road, and water networks in NVN have met with considerable difficulties. It has been estimated that a minimum of 6,000 attack sorties per month would be required against the two rail lines from China. Even at this level of effort, the North Vietnamese could continue to use the rail lines to shuttle supplies if they were willing to devote sufficient manpower to repair and transhipment operations. Interdiction of the road system [illegible] bombing halt north of 19° in April 1968, North Vietnam has repaired all major road and railway bridges, constructed additional bypasses and alternative routes and expanded the railroad capacity by converting large segments from meter to dual gauge truck. These improvements would make even more difficult prolonged interdiction of the overland lines of communication.

We currently fly approximately 7,000 sorties per month against two primary roads in Laos without preventing throughput truck traffic; the road network from China has 7-10 principal arteries and numerous bypasses. Finally, the monsoonal weather in NVN would make it difficult to sustain interdiction on the land lines of communication. Poor visibility would prevent air strikes during 25-30% of the time during good weather months and 50-65% of the time during poor weather months. Thus, it is not possible to give a definitive amount to the question of how much war-essential imports could come into NVN if sea imports are denied and a strong air campaign is initiated.

Attention would also have to be given to interdiction of supplies coming into SVN from Cambodia. Over the past 2 years, the enemy's use of Cambodia as a supply base and a place of refuge has become more pronounced. During the period October 1967 to September 1968, 10,000 tons of munitions transited Sihanoukville and are suspected of having been delivered to enemy forces in the Cambodia-Republic of Vietnam border regions. This amount represents more than enough ordnance to satisfy the arms and ammunition requirements for all enemy forces in South Vietnam during the same period. Thus, the act of sealing off the enemy's Cambodian supply lines must be considered as an integral part of any plan to prevent supplies from reaching enemy forces in the Republic of Vietnam.

The State Department's Answer

The crux of this question is the definition of "war-essential imports." There is room for considerable disagreement on this subject, but in our judgement, the category of war-essential imports should include most of the economic aid provided by the Soviets and Chinese, as well as nearly all of their purely military aid. The reason for this is that economic aid is equally if not more important than military aid in keeping North Viet-Nam a

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going concern. (During 1968, economic aid totaled approximately $[illegible] million and military aid about $540 million). In fact, it can probably be assumed that all North Vietnamese imports in the past few years have been directly related to the war effort. The regime would not have used its sparse funds and credits, or burdened its strained transport system, with non-essential goods.

Food imports constitute a growing percentage of total imports, in 1968 replacing general cargo as the single largest category of imports. This reflects the steady decline in crop acreages and yields that began in 1965 and has continued through the present. The importance of food imports can hardly be overstated; even with them, North Viet-Nam has been forced to strictly ration foodstuffs on the official market and progressively to reduce the composition of the rice ration so that at present it consists 60 percent of rice substitutes such as domestic corn and imported wheat. In addition, a thriving black market has grown up, dealing in foodstuffs (and other items as well) and involving large numbers of DRV lower level officials and cadres, as well as average citizens.

Economic aid has been essential in keeping North Viet-Nam afloat; under present conditions it is extremely doubtful that Hanoi could dispense with any substantial portion of this aid.

The question becomes, therefore, "Could North Viet-Nam continue to receive and distribute most of the economic aid and nearly all of the military aid it is now obtaining from foreign suppliers if Haiphong and other key ports were closed and if the road and rail lines from China were heavily bombed?" A second question is: "What would happen if it could not?"

To begin with, it must be noted that in practical terms it would be impossible to deny *all* imports by sea. Even if the one principal port (Haiphong) and the two secondary ports (Cam Pha and Hon Gai) were closed, there would still be twelve minor ports as well as numerous coastal transshipment points suitable for over-the-beach off-loading. Lightering operations would permit an indeterminate amount of supplies to enter North Viet-Nam from the sea. It is nearly certain, however, that these minor ports and transshipment points could not handle anything like the present volume of imports going into Haiphong. (It is estimated that 85 percent of the total aid to Hanoi arrives by sea, i.e., through Haiphong. Almost all of this is economic aid, since military supplies are generally believed to come overland via China.)

We do not believe that the capacity of the DRV-CPR road and rail network is great enough to permit an adequate flow of supplies in the face of an intense day and night bombing campaign. In our view, earlier analyses which have claimed a virtually unlimited capacity for this [illegible] overestimated the importance of [illegible] ical considerations of transport capacities and did not give adequate weight to the very real difficulties the North Vietnamese have experienced in handling imports even when Haiphong was relatively untouched. It is true that these difficulties were overcome, but to our knowledge there is no evidence that Hanoi would be able to deal as successfully with the closing of Haiphong and heavy attacks on lines of communication from China. We therefore believe that interdiction of Haiphong and heavy attacks on the rail lines from China would over time prevent North Viet-Nam from receiving sufficient economic and military aid to continue the war effort. But it would be difficult to quantify this, since it depends on the type and intensity of interdiction.

On the other hand, one important point should be kept in mind. The North Vietnamese surprised many observers, and confounded many predictions, by holding the North together and simultaneously sending ever-increasing amounts of supplies and personnel into the South during 3½ years of bombing. It is clear that the bombing campaign, as conducted, did not live up to the expectations of many of its proponents. With this experience in mind, there is little reason to believe that new bombing will accomplish what previous bombings failed to do, unless it is conducted with much greater intensity and readiness to defy criticism and risk of escalation.

This brings us to the second part of the question, "What would happen if Hanoi could not obtain sufficient war-essential imports, as defined earlier?" Here again, there does not seem to be any quantifiable answer; we are reduced to educated estimates. If we arbitrarily assume that nearly all military aid reached North Viet-Nam (because it is relatively compact and could be transported by a small number of freight cars or a larger number of trucks, and because it has a high priority) but that only *half* of the economic aid did, we think that by strenuous exertions and considerable belt-tightening the North Vietnamese could continue on their present course for perhaps at most two years more. Beyond that time, barring a ceasefire or protracted lull in the fighting in South Viet-Nam (either of which would greatly ease Hanoi's burdens), we would estimate that Hanoi would be forced (1) to make concessions to the US in order to get Haiphong reopened, or (2) at least to reduce the scale of the war in the South to manageable proportions, perhaps by reverting to political struggle backed by terrorism and selected guerrilla operations which did not require Northern aid and personnel. Of course, other factors such as manpower shortages would figure in the same time-frame.

It should be noted, in conclusion, that [illegible] *advisability* of closing Haiphong, nor the question of the Soviet and Chinese responses. These matters, clearly the most central problems, lie outside the terms of reference of Question 28 (d).

The CIA's Answer

All of the war-essential imports could be brought into North Vietnam over rail lines or roads from China in the event that imports by sea were successfully denied. The disruption to imports, if seaborne imports were cut off, would be widespread but temporary. Within two or three months North Vietnam and its allies would be able to implement alternative procedures for maintaining the flow of essential economic and military imports. The uninterrupted capacities of the railroad, highway, and river connections with China are about 16,000 tons per day, more than two and a half times the 6,300 tons per day of total imports overland and by sea in 1968, when the volume reached an all-time high. Experience in North Vietnam has shown that an intensive effort to interdict ground transport routes by air attack alone can be successful for only brief periods because of the redundancy of transport routes, elaborate and effective countermeasures, and unfavorable flying weather.

Almost four years of air war in North Vietnam have shown—as did the Korean War—that, although air strikes will destroy transport facilities, equipment, and supplies, they cannot successfully interdict the flow of supplies because much of the damage can frequently be repaired within hours. Two principal rail lines connect Hanoi with Communist China, with a combined capacity of over 9,000 tons a day. Eight primary highway routes cross the China border, having a combined capacity of about 5,000 tons per day. In addition, the Red River flows out of China and has a capacity averaging 1,500 tons per day.

An intensive and sustained air interdiction program could have a good chance of reducing the northern rail capacity by at least half. However, roads are less vulnerable to interdiction, and waterways even less so. In the June-August 1967 air attacks—a previous high point of US interdiction efforts against targets in the northern part of North Vietnam—the transport system was able to function effectively.* Strikes in August 1967 against the Hanoi-Dong Dang rail line were effective in stopping through service for a total of only ten days. Strikes during this period against the highways that parallel the Dong Dang line showed no insignificant [*sic*] or sustained reduction of capacity. The Hanoi-Lao Cai rail [illegible] the

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Viet Tri bridge, was maintained at 700 tons per day by use of a rail ferry. If more capacity had been required, however, there is every reason to believe that additional facilities would have been installed at this location to restore the through capacity of the line.

In addition to the overland capacity, an airlift from Chinese airfields could potentially provide a means for importing a large volume of high-priority goods. Moreover, total interdiction of seaborne imports would be difficult because shallow-draft lighters could be used to unload cargo from oceangoing ships anchored in waters outside the mined major harbor areas. Large numbers of small coastal ships and junks could move cargoes from ships diverted to southern Chinese ports of Fort Bayard, Canton, or Peihai, and could unload imports over the beaches, or move into North Vietnam's network of inland waterways.

The volume of imports that would be essential to maintain the war cannot be closely estimated. Out of total imports in 1968, less than five percent were military materiel and ammunition. Other imports essential to the war would include petroleum, food, clothing, transport equipment, and construction materials to maintain the lines of communication. In 1968, the volume of all overland and seaborne imports included the following:

Thousand Metric Tons	
Total	2,300
Military materiel	100
Foodstuffs	790
Petroleum	400
Fertilizer	155
Miscellaneous	860

Within the miscellaneous category was an undetermined amount of goods to maintain the economy, to build factories, and to satisfy, at least in part, civilian needs. Moreover, the level of import of some goods was believed to be more than current consumption, permitting a buildup of reserves. It is possible, therefore, that war-essential imports might be as much as one fourth less than the total, or 4,700 tons per day. Whether war-essential imports are estimated to be 4,700 or 6,300 tons per day, however, the overland import capacity would be from two to three times the required import level, and it is unlikely that air interdiction could reduce transport capacities enough over an extended period to significantly constrict import levels.

Interdiction of the lines of communication between Hanoi and the China border could not be sustained at the level that was achieved in the southern Panhandle of North Vietnam during August through October 1968 for a number of reasons. The multiplicity of modes and transport routes in the North would make it necessary to sustain interdiction at a larger number of points than in the Panhandle. Air defenses in the North—

aircraft, missiles, and antiaircraft artillery—make air attacks less accurate and also more costly in terms of US air losses. We believe it is unlikely that either B-52s or Sea Dragon forces could be brought to bear in an interdiction campaign in the north.